Introduction

"The desert journey continues very boringly," wrote a reporter for the Istanbul newspaper *Akşam* in the summer of 1928.[1] The train was headed eastward from the outskirts of the Syrian city of Aleppo (see Figure 1 for a map of the route). "To pass for hours in the middle of a brown expanse amid suffocating heat in a train car that is always shaking is," the reporter complained, "unpleasant." It would get worse. Suddenly, a droning insect flew into the train car. And then another. They were locusts. Someone closed the windows. But the insects continued to collide into the side of the train "incessantly." In their percussive onslaught, the reporter might have heard the rhythm of the region's recent history. After all, it was these creatures that had helped make a landscape that witnessed nomadic sedentarization campaigns, the Armenian genocide, and interwar refugee resettlement. The train hurtled onward.

The most common locust in the region was the Moroccan locust (*Dociostaurus marocannus*; Turkish: *Fas çekirgesi*; Arabic: *al-jarad al-marrakishi*; Figure 2).[2] The name derived from where a Swedish entomologist first "discovered" the creature. In reality, the insects lived in a wide range of places, from Morocco to Central Asia. In

[1] Y. M., "Şark Mektupları: Harran Ovasından Mardin'e kadar . . . ," *Cumhuriyet*, June 17, 1928.

[2] Latchininsky, "Moroccan Locust," 167. The region was also occasionally afflicted by the migratory desert locust (*Schistocerca gregaria*, also known as the Najdi or Sudan locust) – and, in fact, there was a swarm of this species in 1928 – but the Moroccan locust was native to the region. Natural History Museum Archive (NHMA), Syria and Lebanon 6211 – 157, Rapport sur la lutte anti-acridienne dans les Pays du Levant adhérent à l'Accord International du 20 Mai 1926, 1927–1928, p. 3.

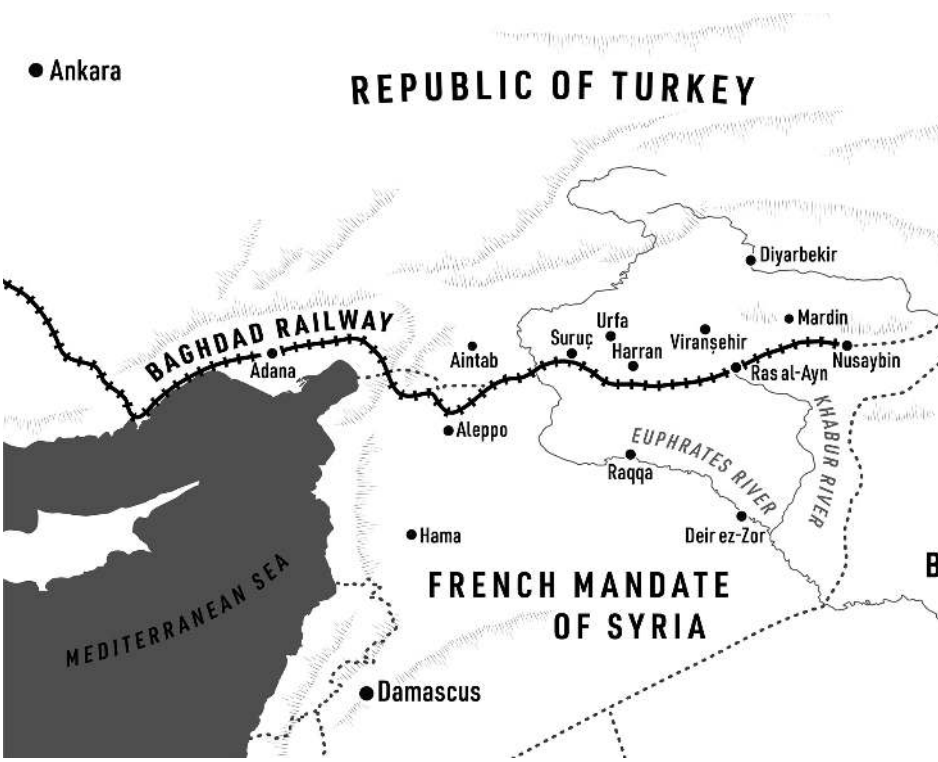

FIGURE 1 Baghdad Railway and post-Ottoman borders of t

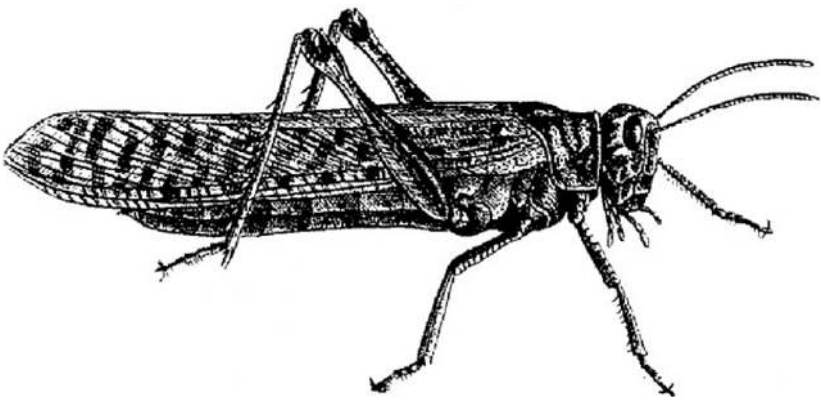

FIGURE 2 The Moroccan locust (*Dociostaurus marocannus*). Maurin, *Invasion des sauterelles*

most years, they remained harmless grasshoppers, but sometimes – because of a mix of precipitation, population density, and weather – they accelerated into what is known as their "gregarious" phase. Their population exploded, and their physiology changed. They swarmed and ranged up to 200 kilometers (124 miles). They blotted out the sun and consumed nearly everything in their path. In the words of one observer, they left nothing behind but "black stumps and their own excreta."[3] They were particularly destructive in zones of expanding cultivation, where planted fields existed alongside their preferred desert and steppe egg-laying grounds. In fact, the insects seemed so connected to human cultivation that elsewhere they were referred to in Arabic as the "human locust" (*al-jarad al-adami*).[4]

Unbeknownst to the bored reporter on the train and overshadowed by infamous figures such as Sykes and Picot, the locusts on the railway in 1928 were in their own way etching borders. In their flight, destruction, and perhaps even excrement, they mapped out an agroecology known as the Jazira – now largely forgotten to those who live outside of it – that stretched from the Tigris to the Euphrates at the foot of the Anatolian plateau. Extending between the cities of Aleppo, Diyarbekir, and Mosul, the Jazira was arid yet fertile, straddling the line where rain-fed agriculture was possible. For centuries, the Jazira functioned as an administrative unit. But when the Ottoman Empire worked to transform the region in the mid-nineteenth century, it attempted to do so through

[3] Lyon, *Kurds, Arabs and Britons*, 174. [4] Latchininsky, "Moroccan Locust," 171.

provinces that divided the connected landscape. When locusts moved across the Jazira, they did so beyond the bounds of provincial borders and often beyond the control of state officials.

Border-crossing movement persisted after the end of the Ottoman Empire, when the insects – and the railway – ensured that Syria and Turkey were curiously linked. The railway had been built in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire with the aim of connecting Berlin and Baghdad. After the Ottoman Empire dissolved in late 1922, a number of successor states emerged in its place, including the Republic of Turkey and the French Mandate of Syria under the neocolonial League of Nations. In the process of dividing once-unified imperial holdings, French and Turkish officials sought a borderline to separate Turkey and Syria and the Ottoman past from the post-Ottoman present. They found such a demarcation in the railway. As the railway moved east of Aleppo, it became the actual border between the countries, Syria to the south of the line and Turkey to the north. Officials thus transformed an infrastructural project intended to rejuvenate the Ottoman Empire into the actual dividing line between post-Ottoman states. Locusts paid little heed to these divisions. In the key of one map depicting the insects' cross-border range (Figure 3), officials had replaced the symbol denoting the railroad. In lieu of the Ottoman infrastructure-turned-cleaver of post-Ottoman states was the thick blue line denoting the range of the locusts. What the map characterized as "the border of the winged" extended from Syria into southeast Turkey.[5]

As locusts moved across Ottoman and post-Ottoman borders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Figures 4 and 5), they animated a mobile ecology entangled with people, including Arab and Kurdish nomads, Armenian deportees, and Assyrian refugees. The groups occupied different relationships to states, with some objects of reform and others targets of destruction. Yet in the Jazira, all of these people encountered locusts, which they variously fled, feared, and, in some cases, ate. They were also connected culturally. In fact, all of these groups found themselves compared to the insects at one point or another. Locusts of power, then, refers to the way that locusts shaped not only the "everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence," as Marx put it, but also the imagination of people in the Jazira.[6] The play on the phrase

[5] NHMA, Turkey 6217, Map of Locust Invasion of 1928–1929 in Turkey.
[6] Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 290.

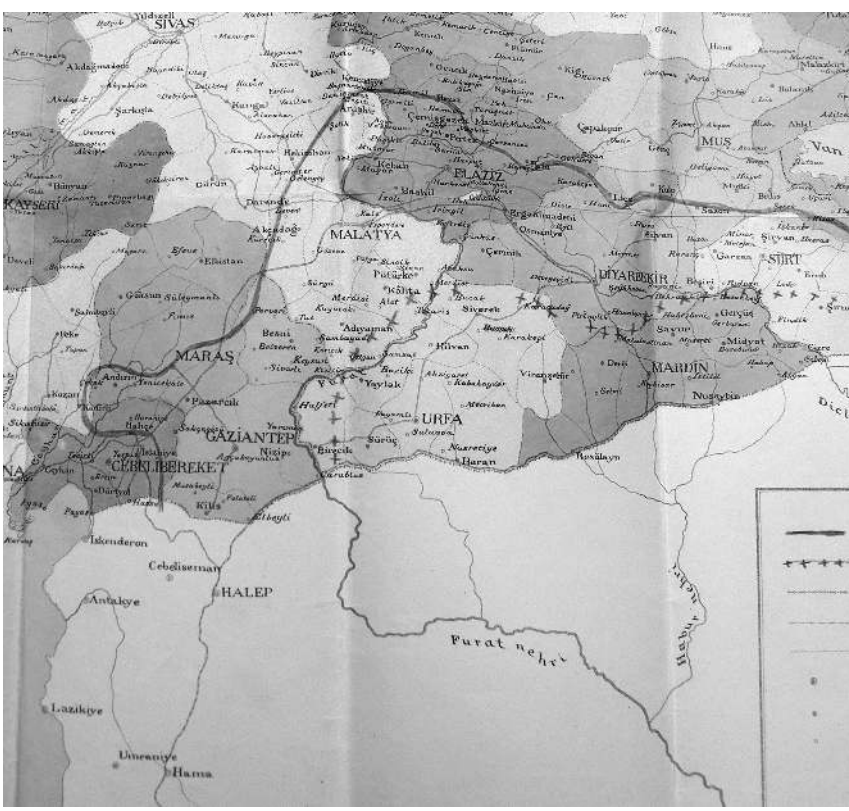

FIGURE 3 "Border of the winged," 1928–1929. NHMA, Turkey 6217. Courtesy of Trustees

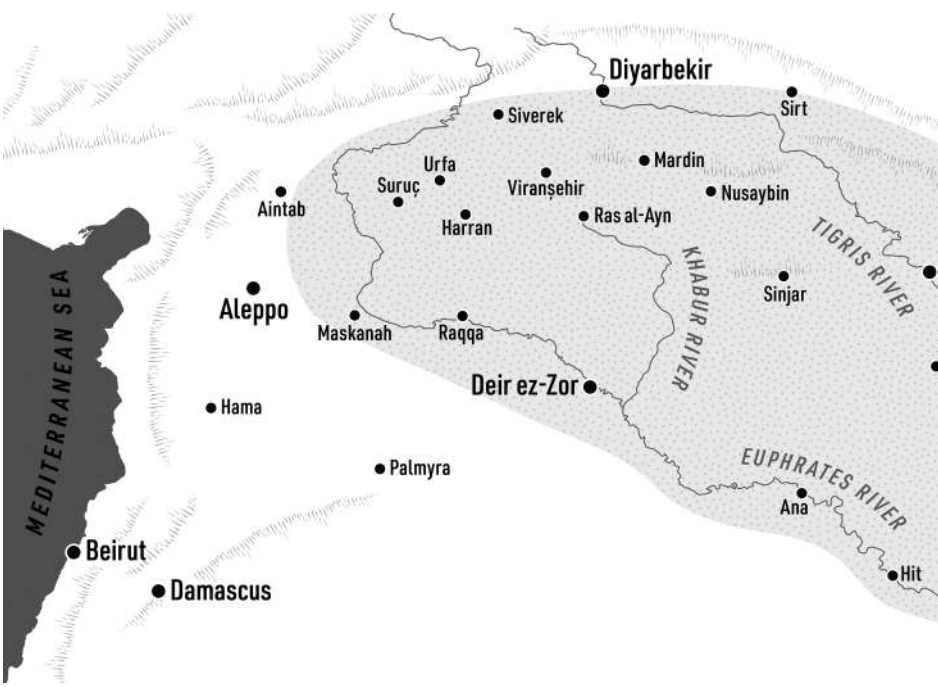

FIGURE 4 Range of Moroccan locusts. Based on Uvarov, "Ecology of th

FIGURE 5 The Jazira, Ottoman provincial borders, and post-Ottoman borders. Provincial bo

"locus of power," moreover, alludes to the significance of the Jazira's place on political and environmental margins for this kind of power.

Indeed, in moving on the edge, both locusts and these groups of mobile people sometimes managed to evade state officials. As a result, locusts and the many moving people of the Jazira might seem marginal in the sense of being unimportant. But in fact, they were marginal in the literal sense of being on the edge of desert and nondesert, one province or nation-state and another. And this place gave them power, similar to what Stephanie Camp, borrowing from Edward Said, has termed a "rival geography."[7] While this position allowed them to carve out some measure of autonomy, these forms of resistance or agency did not exist separately from the structures of power against which they were articulated.[8] Like the Pacific coast of Colombia, the wintertime snows of New England, the small plots of postrevolutionary rural Haiti, or the floating coast of Beringia, the Jazira was a space that simultaneously protected and limited its people.[9] Its landscapes could be used as a weapon, but the mix of arid ecology and political borders also made the Jazira a place into which people might escape.[10]

But it would not remain so. If locusts made the region seem a wasteland to outsiders, the Jazira's status also invited violent efforts at demographic engineering. In 1858, Ottoman officials could do little against locusts but compel peasants to collect the insects' eggs and pray that a Sufi-blessed holy water might attract the insectivorous starling. By 1939, people all across the Jazira could realistically imagine a world without locusts thanks to chemical insecticides and expanded cultivation. Across this same time period, the Jazira shifted from being the site of nomadic sedentarization campaigns to the killing fields of the Armenian genocide to the location of interwar refugee resettlement. With the virtual eradication of locusts, the region known for its verdant grasses and flocks of sheep became some of the region's most productive cotton- and wheat-growing lands in the twentieth century. At the same time, its people also became defined and targeted in relation to nationalist projects in new ways. Monocrop agriculture and minefields fortified the border that locusts – and people – had once easily crossed. Nevertheless, the Jazira and the

[7] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 7; Katz and Smith, "An Interview with Edward Said"; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xx.
[8] Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 214.
[9] Demuth, *Floating Coast*; Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*; Leal, *Landscapes of Freedom*; Wickman, *Snowshoe Country*.
[10] De León, *Land of Open Graves*, 8, 43; Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes*, 9.

power of its place on the edge would not be gone forever. Its particular political ecology has been the scene for various imaginings of Armenian, Assyrian, or Kurdish national homes, and in 2014 even became the heartland of the so-called Islamic State. Though often presented as outside of history, these recent events are connected to the region's legacy of agrarian development, state violence, and popular resistance.

THE JAZIRA AND BORDERS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

The history of the Jazira is to some extent, in Kate Brown's iconic words, "a biography of no place."[11] Though revealed by the territorial extent of locust swarms and violent state-making efforts, the region is largely absent from people's consciousness. It is also at odds with the spatial bounds of much historical scholarship, which more often accept Ottoman provinces or post-Ottoman nation-states as the frames of analysis, rather than treating them as objects of analysis in their own right. But while sharing much with the borderland suddenly made visible by Chernobyl that Brown refers to as the *kresy*, the Jazira is also significantly different.[12] After all, the Jazira – unlike the *kresy* – had a history as an administrative unit for centuries before the twentieth.[13] The Jazira's history is not of no place, but rather of place undone, its disappearance from maps – and collective consciousness – a rather recent development.

The region was renowned in the ancient world, and for centuries it had appeared in geographies and as part of polities. It was there that the ancient epic of settlement *Gilgamesh* emerged, there that Alexander the Great marched along essentially the same path that the Turkish newspaper reporter took on the Baghdad Railway in 1928, and there that the Romans and Sasanians fought over the province of Mesopotamia.[14] The Umayyads formed a Jazira province, and even made their capitals within it at Raqqa and Harran.[15] The Jazira moreover appeared regularly in geographies alongside more recognizable toponyms such as Egypt, Syria, Hijaz, Yemen, and Iraq.[16] A mix of cultivation and pastoralism made life possible in the region, though urban writers often decried nomads as

[11] Brown, *A Biography of No Place*, 1. [12] Ibid., 2. [13] Ibid., 1.
[14] Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; Kriwaczek, *Babylon*, 212; Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, 79; Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia*, 28.
[15] Sarmani, *Tarikh Iqlim al-Jazira al-Furatiyya khilal al-ʿasr al-Marwani al-Umawi*, 7; Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest*, 28, 33.
[16] Antrim, *Routes and Realms*, 97.

evidence of a retreat of human civilization and expansion of the desert environment.[17]

With the emergence of Ottoman rule in the region in the sixteenth century, the Jazira's status changed. Though districts with capitals in Urfa or Raqqa intersected with the Jazira, they were not referred to as such.[18] And the Jazira increasingly functioned as the hinterlands of the Mediterranean entrepôt of Aleppo.[19] The political economic transformations of the world economy rerouted commerce away from these parts, and it seems that the Little Ice Age also contributed to a general movement away from the plains and toward hillsides for cultivation.[20] In the perhaps exaggerated words of Evliya Çelebi, the Jazira town of Harran – once the capital of the Umayyad polity – had become "ruins, the houses dirt."[21] As throughout the empire, so too in the Jazira – officials responded to these dilemmas by trying to incorporate nomadic pastoralists as local notables in ways that defied straightforward understandings of centralization.[22]

In these cracks of empire and the world economy, verdant vegetation grew.[23] Some observers offered specific descriptions of the Jazira's bountiful pastures. According to oral history, "a saddlebag of wilted flowers of buttercups, chamomile, milk thistles, haloxylon, and milfoil" had attracted the Arabic-speaking Shammar tribe to migrate from the Najd in central Arabia to the Jazira in the early nineteenth century.[24] Others gestured to the

[17] Eger, *The Islamic–Byzantine Frontier*, 155. For examples of geographers complaining about nomads and the desert, see Ibn Hawqal, *Kitab Surat al-Ard*, 211; Ibn Jubayr, *Rihlat Ibn Jubayr*, 214–220; Ibn Batuta, *Rihlat Ibn Batuta*, 236–237; Mustawfi, *Nuzhat al-Qulub*, 106.

[18] İnalcık, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, xxxvi.

[19] Masters, *The Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East*, 8–9.

[20] White, *The Climate of Rebellion*, 236–237; Hütteroth, "Settlement Destruction in the Gezira Between the 16th and 19th Century," 286; Tabak, *The Waning of the Mediterranean*, 220.

[21] Evliya Çelebi, *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi*, vol. 3, 161.

[22] Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State*, 154; Husain, *Rivers of the Sultan*, 136; Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire*, 54–55, 70, 72, 75–76, 83; Khoury, *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire*, 9; Masters, *The Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East*, 116; Salzmann, *Tocqueville in the Ottoman Empire*, 11; Thomas, *A Study of Naima*, 5–6, 55; Winter, "Alep et l'émirat du desert (*çöl beyliği*)"; Yaycıoğlu, *Partners of the Empire*.

[23] Bettina Stoetzer uses the term "ruderal" to refer to this dynamic in Berlin as a way of characterizing "the communities that emerge spontaneously in disturbed environments usually considered hostile to life: the cracks of sidewalks, the spaces alongside train tracks and roads, industrial sites, waste disposal areas, or rubble fields." "Ruderal Ecologies," 297.

[24] al-ʿUjayli, *Ahadith al-ʿAshiyat*, 33.